

## **Women Progression In University Leadership: Exploration Of Enablers And Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

The experiences of women working as academic leaders at public and private universities in Lahore, Pakistan, have been explored in this qualitative research with an interpretivist research paradigm. It aimed to study the enablers and challenges experienced by women academic leaders in the universities of Pakistan with reference to the society, organizations, families, and personal life. The population of the study includes women in formal mid to senior-level leadership roles, including Heads of Departments (HODs), Deans, Directors, Campus Coordinators, and other administrative roles, including the formulation of strategic plans and the implementation of policies. A sample of the study were 10 women academic leaders selected using convenience sampling who were interviewed through a semi-structured interview protocol. The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The key findings indicate a variety of enablers and challenges that affect the women academic leaders. The major challenges faced by women academic leaders are their personal issues, including family background, lack of confidence, resources and time management. The study provides some suggestions for policies and future research to enable women to take part in leadership roles in higher education.

**Keywords:** Women's Progression, University Leadership, Academic Leaders,

**Introduction:**

In Pakistan, as a Muslim nation, men are favoured and control practically every aspect of life. In addition, Pakistan's economy is based on agriculture, and the majority of its people reside in rural areas where a powerful political structure is still in place. In rural areas, men often hold a lot of power over women since they view them as a male's commodity. In contrast to rural areas, transformation is accelerating in metropolitan areas as women's standing is greatly improving. Traditional gender standards, however, are powerful enough and deeply ingrained enough in society to resist change in both rural and urban populations. 52.3% of Pakistan's population is made up of women, most of whom (71.5%) are between the ages of 15 and 35.

Pakistani women have experienced a variety of forms of discrimination ever since their nation gained its freedom. With shifting attitudes about women's education and work, the standing of women has increased (Du et al., 2021); yet, their involvement is limited to junior positions, and they have limited mobility. Pakistan has a 0.55 Gender Gap Index. Women make up 39% of the labour force, have a 0.63 literacy rate, participate in politics to a lesser extent (26%), and have only held political office in the state for five years during the last 70 years. In addition to the previously mentioned data, the Global Gender Gap Report from 2014 places Pakistan's women's involvement in economic development at 141st out of 142 countries, which is concerning. It ranked 132<sup>nd</sup> for equitable access to higher education, 119th for women's physical and mental health, and 85<sup>th</sup> for political involvement (Manzoor, 2015).

Leadership plays a significant role in any organization (Jamil et al., 2024; Soeardi et al., 2023; Urooj et al., 2024). Women are still underrepresented in high leadership roles in Pakistan. Although there are many women employed in higher education, very few of them go on to occupy important roles like dean, director or vice chancellor. This research aims to investigate the real-life experiences of these women, highlighting the obstacles that still stand in their way of progress and the people who help them along the journey to leadership. The disparity between men and women in leadership positions in higher education has long been a topic of concern on a global scale. The disparity between men and women in leadership positions in higher education has long been a topic of concern on a global scale.

Despite notable advancements and the implementation of several initiatives in nations worldwide, women are still underrepresented in top leadership roles. Research demonstrates that a variety of factors, such as gender prejudice, a lack of support systems, a lack of mentorship opportunities and the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities, still keep women from achieving high academic leadership positions (Thien et al., 2025). Sometimes, gender biased institutional norms and informal processes restrict women's leadership potential (Kela et al., 2024).

According to academics, women working at Pakistani institutions usually face a variety of challenges that hinder their professional advancement (Aman et al., 2021; Arif et al., 2023). Even while many women now work as lecturers or assistant

professors, few go on to become associate professors, full professors or administrative leaders (Shah et al., 2020). Most female academics should balance their personal and professional responsibilities sometimes without institutional support, such as flexible hours at work or childcare. Additionally, they may be excluded from informal decision-making networks and subjected to prejudice in promotion processes. These characteristics make it difficult for women to visualize or pursue a profession in educational leadership. The aim of this research was to understand more about the aspects that support their growth and the barriers that restrict it. Setting academic priorities, promoting research and furthering inclusive growth all depend heavily on university leadership.

#### **Research Objectives:**

To examine the enablers that support women's leadership advancement.

To identify key challenges that hinder women's progression into leadership roles.

#### **Literature Review:**

The process of leadership is neither systematic nor predictable; rather, it is inconsistent and irregular. The real history of any leader is filled with mistakes, misinterpretations and omissions. According to Ramsden et al. (2007), this task is better learnt than taught. It was found that the only way to become a good leader was to actively manage a variety of tasks, take constructive criticism and recommendations from colleagues, assess information fast and efficiently and modify strategies to avoid mistakes.

Leadership studies have emphasized how important it is for current and future leaders (House & Podsakoff, 1994; Lord, 2017) to receive leadership training in order to effectively expand their organizations and manage leadership crises. Research on leadership has demonstrated that in order to improve leadership effectiveness, regular, relevant programs with a real-world emphasis are necessary. Such training programs have to incorporate a hands-on learning approach supervised by qualified professionals in the field (Scott et al., 2008).

According to Hoobler et al. (2014), women can become more successful leaders by improving their language and communication skills. The study contrasted two groups of leaders under different situations. Participants in the intervention group were given identical instructions for the exercise as those in the control group. "This is a safe environment to learn and practice leadership," was written in a brief letter of encouragement and gratitude. In the intervention group, women were significantly and disproportionately fewer than in the control group; however, in the control group, this difference was eliminated. There has been positive recent growth in Pakistan's teacher education system. In collaboration with nonprofit programs like the USAID Teacher Education Project, the Pakistani government has put in place a number of measures to improve the calibre and accessibility of teacher education in the nation (Khaki & Safdar, 2010). Enhancing the professional growth of educators, head teachers, teacher educators, education managers, schools, teacher education institutions and district-level education administration has been one way to do this.

The professional growth of the number of its papers has also received support from the Pakistani government. The National Commission of Government Service Reforms (2006), the White Paper on Education (2006), the National Education Policy (2009), and many Keform Support Projects (2003) all include the heads of provincial institutions as educational leaders (Bana & Khaki, 2015). Since most administrators spend the majority of their time carrying out formal procedural work and monitoring their professors and staff to ensure that they are abiding by institutional norms and regulations, it is clear that not much has changed in higher education institutions over the past 20 years. Instead of enhancing organizational growth and leadership, it is supporting the old bureaucracy. Shahid and Asiahbinti (2011) found that leaders' self-doubt makes it difficult for them to effect change. Therefore, if we want to change or improve the academic leader's leadership characteristics, we need to change how they see themselves.

According to Kossek and Buzzanell (2018), several women who have effectively progressed to leadership positions have shown determination, flexibility and a strong sense of purpose. These individual traits frequently help women overcome institutional challenges and stand up for themselves in settings with limited chances. These results align with international literature that highlights the importance of determination and self-reliance in leadership efficacy (Kela et al., 2024). The study also highlights the importance of supportive factors within the community, family and colleagues. The stress of managing several responsibilities may be considerably less with the emotional and practical support of colleagues, mentors, and family members, enabling women to continue their leadership positions.

### Research Methodology:

It was a qualitative study with an interpretivist research paradigm and phenomenology research design. The population of the study consisted of women in formal mid to senior-level leadership roles, including Heads of Departments (HODs), Deans, Directors, Campus Coordinators, and other administrative roles, including the formulation of strategic plans and the implementation of policies. A sample of the study were 10 women academic leaders selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

### Findings:

The thematic analysis resulted in a set of facilitators and obstacles appropriate to the upward movement of women in leadership positions. Such results shed some light on the complexity and multi-layered gendered leadership experiences in universities.

**Table 1: An overview of the main themes, sub-themes, codes, and illustrative quotations**

Main Themes	Sub Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotations
Gendered Barriers in	Structural Barriers	Lack of	The current occupancy of

University Leadership		representation, Gendered norms Male-dominated structures	leadership and decision-making positions by men offers a major challenge to the career ascendancy of women.
	Cultural Expectations	Family pressurization Domestic roles, Work-home imbalance	Societal expectations that women have more responsibilities at home limit their involvement in leadership roles.
	Workplace Issues	Prejudice Inequal distribution of tasks, etc.	Women are peripherally involved in key committees; this deprives them of exposure and career-building opportunities.
Personal Enablers	Self-Confidence	Self-belief, Assertiveness	Always believe in oneself, and the woman will reach any job.
	Skills Qualifications	&Advanced degrees; Leadership development	Advanced educational qualifications and leadership development create the confidence needed to become a leader.
	Resilience	Special ability to transcend the determination	Continued involvement in the face of criticism was a cause of resilience that surfaced repeatedly as a contributing factor to resilience.
Institutional Support	Supportive Leadership	Encouragement; Mentoring	Mentoring by the top-level management helped me in the transition to the leadership positions.
	Professional Development;	Training; Growth opportunities	Institutional training programs enabled me to grow significantly in terms of my leadership skills.
	Gender-Friendly Policies	Flexible policies and Equity initiatives	Gender-friendly policies and flexible scheduling: Push employees towards

			professional growth.
Peer and Social Support	Family Support	Spousal encouragement, Family cooperation	Spousal encouragement played a critical role in making me agree to take a leadership position.
	Colleague Support	Good atmosphere, Cooperative culture	Collaborative support encouraged my active participation in issues and my ability to express opinions.
Leadership Identity and Motivation	Purpose and Commitment	Passion for education; Wish to make positive changes to the education system	I took up a leadership position to bring positive changes to the educational system.
	Influence & Agency	Decision-making authority: More impact	Leadership gives the decision-making authority required to transform the system to the advantage of all stakeholders.
	Career Aspirations:	Long-term goals Vision	I have always been bent towards an administrative career path.
Difficulty in Leadership Positions	Workload Problems: heavy workload; Burnout	heavy workload; Burnout	Workload may seem excessive in leadership positions.
	Lack of Recognition	Underappreciation	Much work is not always rewarded with an equivalent amount of recognition.
	Gender Bias	Stereotyping; Untrusting women their ability to perform leadership roles, Stereotyping	Occasionally, there is a belief that women cannot have the roles of leadership.

### **Women Leadership Progression Enablers**

#### **Helping Leadership and Personnel Humouring**

Respondents constantly noted that support by their superiors, departmental heads, and peers were a key contributor to their development in leadership. Firm leadership helped women to take on duties confidently and gave them a psychological guarantee that their efforts were not disrespected. A lot of women reported that their appreciation of their abilities to lead the line, mentoring skills, and trust of their senior executives enhanced their perception of their self-leadership.

### **Training and Professional Development**

Access to leadership-related training, workshops, academic committees and administrative activities was the other key enabler. Such opportunities, as participants mentioned, are the keys to developing confidence and learning about the processes in the institutions. Those women who had been incorporated into decision-making forums, research committees, and administrative placements were more willing to take on formal leadership roles.

### **Personal Dedication, Perseverance, and Inspirations**

One of the themes that came out among the participants was intrinsic motivation. Women were focused on such aspects as perseverance, enthusiasm towards education, commitment to students, and determination to make a contribution to their institutions. Most of them complained that their resilience at individual levels has enabled them to overcome tough situations, handle various responsibilities, and pursue their dream roles of becoming leaders.

### **Policies in the organization that help women**

In other instances, the institutional policies, including maternity leave, flexible working time, supportive managers and straightforward promotion guidelines, acted as facilitators. Although this type of policy was not a universal part of some universities, the participants who received such policies were able to achieve a better balance between personal and professional responsibilities and were more likely to continue dedicating themselves to their professions.

### **Key Challenges of Women's Leadership in Universities**

#### **Gender Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Patriarchalities**

Among the most common problems, gender bias was mentioned. Participants talked about the image of a male-oriented position of leadership, and women are not always considered able to pressure, decide, and deal with administrative roles. There were cases of discriminatory comments, micro aggressions, or implicit challenges to the competence of some participants just because of their gender.

#### **Family Responsibilities and Pressures of Work-Life Balance**

Almost everyone mentioned that it was hard to balance work-related duties with family and household needs. The cultural demands often hinder the working long hours and the professional development missions because of the major responsibility of women as primary caregivers. Women who had school-going children noted that they were faced with more stress on time management, domestic chores, in addition to professional duties.

#### **Few Opportunities and Disproportionate Institutional Reinforcement**

A number of the participants claimed that some women are occasionally not included in significant decision-making projects, leadership forces, or visible projects. They reported new promotion avenues that were not clear and, in certain instances, preference or administrative politics that favoured other male colleagues. An informal in-group of males, coupled with a lack of networking opportunities, was also felt as an impediment.

### **Power Dynamics and Politics in Organizations**

The issue of institutional politics was a major challenge. Participants had commented on workplaces with favouritism, bureaucracy, personal issues or hierarchical relationships which increased the pressure of leadership positions. Women knew that they needed to work more than men to be listened to, and some said that they felt lonely in the male-dominated leadership arenas.

### **Discussion**

This study was aimed at investigating the factors that enable and hinder women from advancing into leadership positions in Pakistani universities. The results showed that women's leadership experiences a complicated interplay among individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. This discussion identifies these findings based on the available literature and how the findings can be applied to the overall knowledge of gender and leadership in higher education. The research concluded that facilitating leadership and team support were essential in the progress of women. The participants stressed that the support of their higher colleagues (mentorship, guidance, and trust) helped them become more confident and encouraged them to assume leadership roles. This is in line with the international literature, which highlights the significance of the mentoring networks in helping women to be leaders (Eagly et al., 2007). South Asian-based research also reveals that institutional cultures with a gendered aspect can be counteracted by the formal and informal supportive systems (Shah, 2009). The results of the current research thus support the fact that facilitator figures could be used as the drivers of female leadership development even in the male organizational context. For quality education, professional development has a significant role (Abbas et al., 2021; Naveed et al., 2022). The findings also revealed that women had opportunities to develop professional skills through workshops, administrative exposure and leadership training, which allowed them to develop necessary skills and visibility.

### **Conclusion**

The empirical results of this study prove that the progress of women to the leadership position of universities is conditional on structural, cultural, institutional, and personal factors. The study made an exploration of the facilitating processes that help women to get to the top leadership positions and the barriers that hinder their succession in the Pakistani institutions of higher education. The study found that despite significant gains that women had made in the academic world, the world of leadership still had gendered inequalities that are deeply rooted in historical and societal constructs. One

of the main assumptions that can be made based on the data is that women manage to achieve success in leadership not only because of the institutional arrangement, but often despite it. The supportive leadership patterns, collegial support, and professional development opportunities were perceived as powerful enablers; however, they were not equally available throughout the institutions. Only the women who were mentored or even exposed to administrative duties were able to make the transition into leadership positions without a doubt. This finding highlights a lack of institutionalized and formal women leadership development paths in universities and implies that change will take place, not necessarily depending on systematic organizational procedures but on luck, personal connections or personal initiative. The research also confirms that gender bias and a patriarchal mindset are still active obstacles in academic institutions. The participants explained implicit and explicit stereotypes which define perceptions about women's leadership ability. Although such biases are not explicit all the time, they are often refined in nature, like doubting the ability of women to perform in a certain role, giving them less significant duties, or assuming that family obligations limit their potential to be in a leadership role.

#### **Recommendations:**

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:

Universities need to set up an official mentoring program where upcoming women leaders are allocated experienced administrators.

Institutions should create similar policies regarding maternity leave, flexible working hours and clear promotion requirements.

Faculty, staff, and higher-level administrators should be required to attend workshops to help them cut down on unconscious bias and gender stereotyping.

Women should be incorporated in educational councils, policy-making committees, budget boards, and key administrative forums.

Women should be invited to conferences, research, cross-institutional networks, and leadership forums.

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